

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

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Your Silhouette on a Snowdrift

All night you sob at your desk,
attempting to compose a memo
to save your job. The pockmarks
of rain in the snowpack suggest
one of those diseases vaccine
should have eradicated years
ago, leaving only faint scars.
But rain on the snow reiterates
a lifetime of subtle erasures.

The hum of your computer
seems objective enough to calm
even the crudest outrage,
but the economy has sickened
and your job seems superfluous
to the vast insurance company
on which you've wasted your life.

Your memo will balance your hours
against your output and prove
you push more paper than a wood
chuck chucks wood. Your desk lamp casts
your silhouette on a snowdrift.
The corrosive rain attacks it,
marring the shadow's plain texture
without distorting the outline
of your neoclassical profile.

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You won't lose your job. The memo
will resolve the distance between
the executive staff and you,
and when eventually you retire
a plaque of brassy plastic
will commemorate your efforts
and render you monumental.

Tonight, however, the rain hurts
and the snow weeps in sympathy,
and you face your modest future
with a shadow cast so casually
someone might think it your ghost.

An Unmarked Railroad Crossing

As we approach, a trail hustles past
without tooting its horn or flashing
its ditch lights. Battered old boxcars
smutty with graffiti, black tank cars
brimming caustic green chemicals,

gondolas bristling with glossy scrap.
We shudder at the awful crash
we avoided by twenty feet.
No warning, only the onrush
of all that deadly tonnage.

The long freight passes. We approach
the single track, a rusty branch line,
the rails barely visible in snow,
but instinct stalls us a moment
before we cross. Another train

growls past, a switch engine dragging
battered work cars loaded with ties,
a couple of derrick cars, an actual
if derelict caboose, windows
blinker with plywood. Again

we approach the crossing, but now
a lone railcar whizzes past,
a pickup truck equipped to ride
steel rails, a fat bearded fellow
grinning at the wheel. This time

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I dash across on foot and look
up and down the line. Nothing coming.
You drive across, I hop in,
and as we continue we agree
no railroad ran through here

yesterday, last month, or last year.
Yet the track looks old and settled
and those trains despite refusing
to sound their diesel horns looked
solid enough to smash us flat

if we'd challenged their right-of-way.
We drive on, far more cautious now,
and as the moon rises behind us
we hear the steel contract in the cold
with a chuckle of devilish glee.